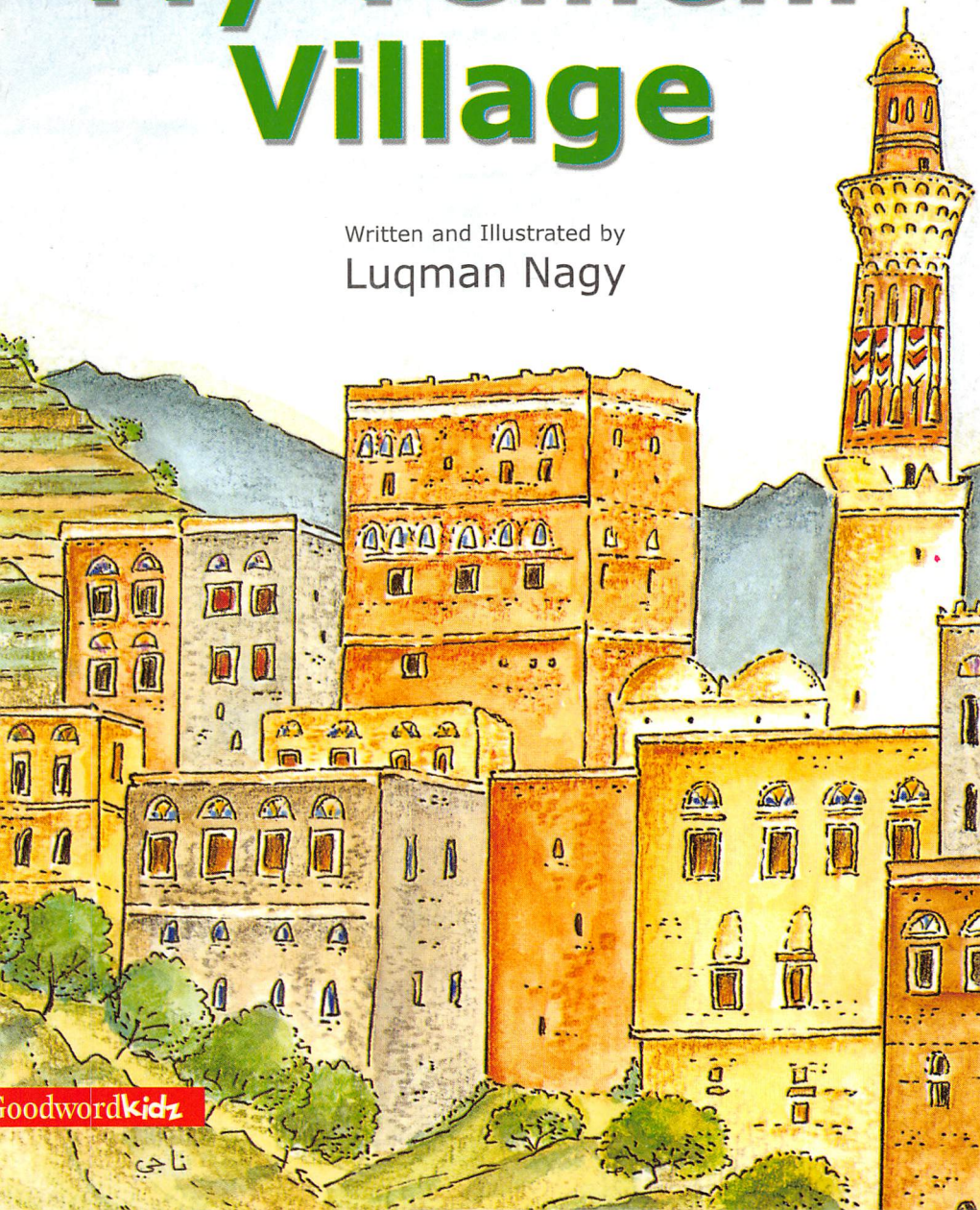
My Islamic Village

My Yemeni Village

Written and Illustrated by
Luqman Nagy



Goodwordkidz

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This book is dedicated to my daughter, Meryem Nur.

This is very beautiful gold dinar coin from the time of Queen 'Arwa bint Ahmed (1091-1137 CE). It boldly proclaims the *shahada*.

'Arwa bint Ahmed became queen when her husband al-Mukkaram died. This Sulahid dynasty queen ruled all of Yemen from the town Jiblah. Queen 'Arwa was known by her people as the "little Balqis".

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Yemen, a land situated in the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula, is unique. Centuries before the coming of Islam, Yemen was known as *Arabia Felix* (Latin for "Happy, Blessed Arabia"). It grew rich from the sale of incense like myrrh and frankincense to the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.

Unlike all its neighbours on the Arabian peninsula, Yemen is a land of mountains. It is here, in the highland villages of the north, that a pristine form of the classical Arabic language has been preserved. These remote mountain villages have also helped keep alive a unique tradition of building in stone. Rainfall enables the cultivation of crops in these high elevations through a complex system of terraced fields.

This book will introduce the young reader to Yemeni village life. 'Abd al-Nur lives in the beautiful village of Al-Ashrafiyyah where Islamic traditions have been maintained and cherished over the years. Readers might be surprised to learn that "skyscrapers" are not the invention of the West; 'Abd al-Nur and its ancestors have lived in one for centuries!

Warmest salaams to you all.

Luqman Nagy
May 2002

King Fahd University
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

My name is 'Abd al-Nur and I am a thirteen year old Muslim boy, *Al-Hamdulillah*. I live in a beautiful village called Al-Ashrafiyyah in the high mountains of Yemen.

Yemen is a very old country. Hundreds of years before the coming of Islam, the Sabean and Himyarite kings ruled Yemen. The Holy Qur'an refers to the land of Saba' (Sheba) in *Surah al-Naml* verse 22.

> But the hoopoe stayed not long; he (came up and) said: "I have grasped (the knowledge of a thing) which you have not grasped and I have come to you from Saba' (Sheba) with true news."

According to Arab tradition, the people of my country, Yemen, are descendents of Qahtan, a relative of Shem, the first son of Nuh عليه السلام. The origin of the name Yemen (from the Arabic *al-yameen* 'right') is very interesting too. Some say it is because the direction of Yemen lies to the right of the Ka'bah in Holy Makkah if one stands facing east.

The mountains are high near our village. I have never seen snow, but my father remembers seeing some on the highest peaks once when he was a small boy. Our village consists of many stone tower-houses. These houses are sometimes 6-7 stories high! From the roof tops we can look down into the valleys where we have our farm land.

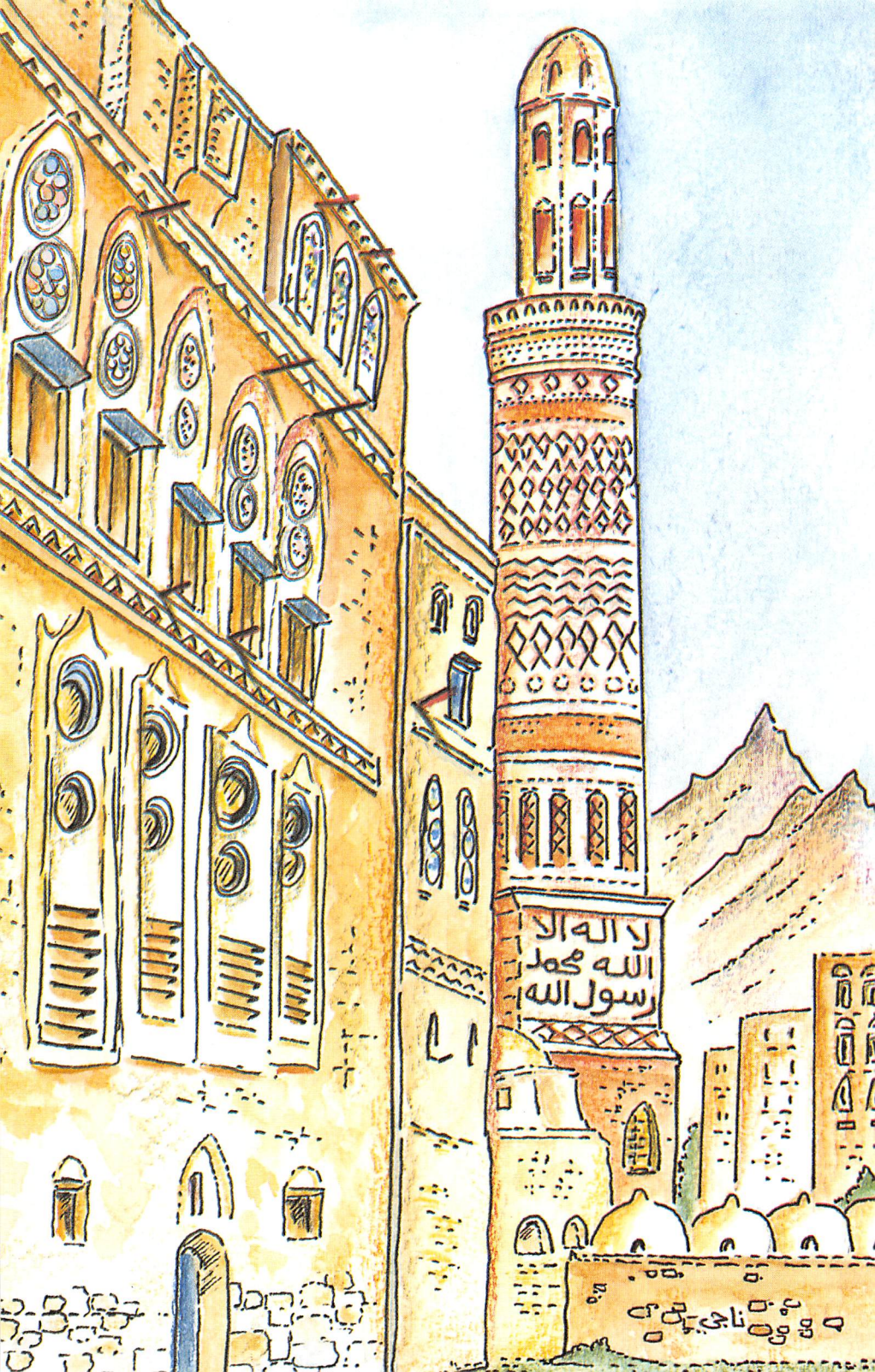
My house is opposite the mosque in the centre of the village. Can you see it?

Ahlan *wa sahlan wa marhaban fee baytuna* ("welcome to our house"), as we say in Arabic. I was born in this house and my father was too!

Both my father and grandfather build mosques and minarets using local stone. My grandfather built our house almost 70 years ago. I have watched my father build a house like ours. The most difficult part is cutting the large stones for the foundation and lower levels. Constructing the staircase inside the house also requires a lot of time and patience. There are sometimes forty stone stairs leading to the top floor which are made of blocks of differing height. I wasn't able to climb by myself to the top story of the house until I was almost five years old!

Our house is a typical Yemeni structure. It appears higher than it really is. Double rows of windows on each floor make the house seem larger. Some village houses are much older than ours. Large blocks of stone from pre-Islamic ruins were often used to build their foundations. Occasionally, these ancient stones have very beautiful Himyaritic (pre-Islamic) inscriptions (writing) on them. The upper levels are built of bricks of mud and straw which are then plastered over.

Our home is five stories high. We use the lowest level to keep our animals (a donkey and six chickens). The kitchen is on the next level. Bedrooms occupy the upper stories. Finally, on the very top is the important *mafraj* or sitting room – definitely the most beautiful room in our house.

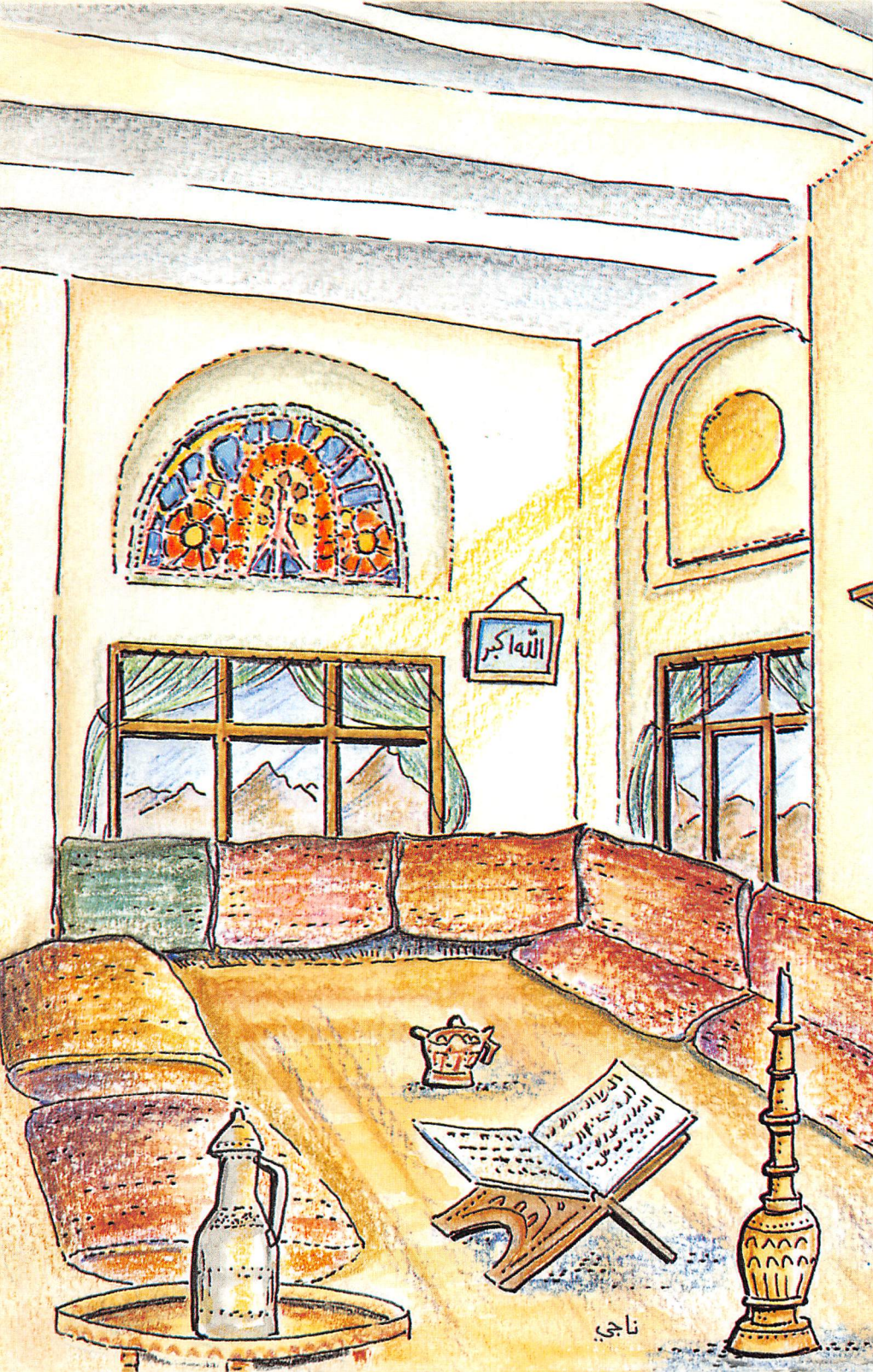

لا اله الا
الله محمد
رسول الله

Every adult in Al-Ashrafiyyah village is an artisan. Allah has blessed each of us with a unique skill. We all enjoy using our hands to make beautiful things. Potters create useful and practical containers; many village women weave wonderful sturdy baskets of all sizes; and stone masons carefully cut and shape blocks out of solid rock.

This is our *mafraj* or sitting room on the top floor of our house. The coloured glass windows here are made by another group of very special artisans. Even today, the window designs are still traditional. Years ago, however, many window panes were not of glass. Thin sheets of pale yellow stone called alabaster were cut out and placed in the upper window openings to soften the direct sunlight. We still have one circular alabaster window pane left in our house. Can you see it?

We use the *mafraj* when guests come to visit. On *'eid* days, we greet our relatives, neighbours and friends here. It is always my job to light the incense burner. The room soon fills with the beautiful odour of burning frankincense.

My father is a *hafidh al-qur'an*; he memorized the entire Qur'an before his tenth birthday, *masha Allah*. I am not a *hafidh*, but I do like to sit in the *mafraj* and read from my grandfather's beautiful, large hand-written Qur'an. It was written about two hundred years ago by a master calligrapher in San'a, our country's capital city.


الله اكبر
ناجي

Two or three thousand years ago, the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans used vast amounts of expensive frankincense and myrrh to burn before their idols. Southern Arabia, and Yemen, in particular, was the source of such incense.

Frankincense bushes still grow in the lower valleys not far from our village. My uncle uses a special tool to cut the bark of the small trees at regular intervals. A milky white sap (called *laban* in Arabic) emerges. When the beads of frankincense harden into a green or yellow resin, they are scraped off the tree. After harvesting, my uncle sells the frankincense in the local market.

Frankincense is carefully bought and pieces are burned in a traditional incense burner called a *majmarah*. *Majmarahs*, like the one in the picture, are made by local potters. The design has not changed in hundreds of years. Our *majmarah* looks like a cup with a handle. It is lime-washed and then painted with colourful inks.

Because incense is expensive to buy, villagers use it only on special occasions such as at weddings and during the two *'eids* when we welcome guests in our *mafraj*. My grandmother, however, continues to use small pieces of frankincense as a medicine for upset stomachs. She also believes that a mixture of frankincense, olive oil and honey added to water relieves rheumatism. She always reminds me that this traditional cure is better than any drug from a modern pharmacy!

My father likes to burn a small piece of frankincense every Friday morning. We perfume our best Friday clothes before going to the mosque and my father even puts his beard over the *majmarah*!

ناجي

As in many other parts of Dar al-Islam, traditional weekly markets are held in the mountain valleys of Yemen. Each Saturday, after the dawn prayers, a large and colourful market just outside Al-Ashrafiyyah village attracts hundreds of people.

Market day, called *suq as-sabt* in Arabic, is an exciting time for everyone. When I am not in school, I usually go with my uncle to help him sell his frankincense. The incense looks like small yellow or light green pebbles. We burn some in a *majmarah* to convince customers of its purity. Other sellers in the market offer incense in the form of bark, balls of gum, and even as cookie-shaped disks mixed with sandalwood.

Yemen has always been famous for its high quality honey. Bee keepers selling their honey in stalls always have a lot of customers. The honey is usually one of two types: a clear white variety or a golden yellow type. One spoonful of this rich honey can cure many ailments, *masha Allah*. My mother even cooks with this healthful mountain honey.

The marketplace is always full of very skilled artisans selling their wares. The rope makers, saddle makers, *jambiyyah* (dagger) makers, and potters each has his own special area. Pottery makers offer beautifully crafted *sharbat al-arus* jugs that are used on special occasions like weddings. Basket makers display wonderful baskets of different sizes with conical lids and goatskin leather bottoms. The smaller ones are used to store herbal remedies while the larger baskets hold the best dates which we will eat in Ramadhan.

Today, I am looking at the *jambiyyahs* for sale. Will my father buy me one of these, I wonder.

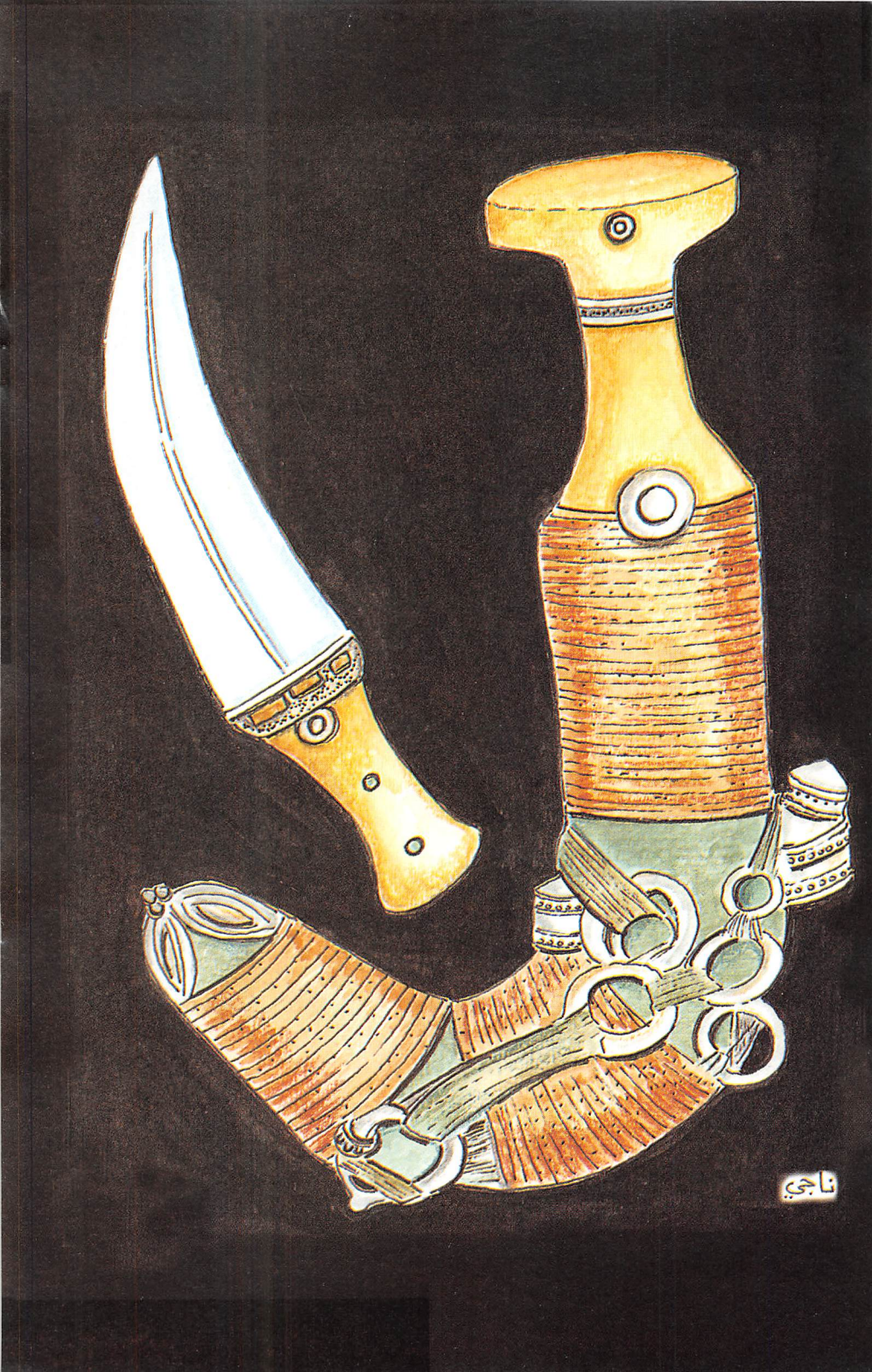
In the past, there were important centres in the Middle East for the manufacture of swords and other weapons. Damascus in Syria was one such centre. But for centuries, quality swords and daggers have also been made here in Yemen.

Some dagger blades are still produced in Yemen, but most are now imported from Japan. Fathers still choose a well-made dagger (or *jambiyyah* in Arabic) as a gift to their sons on reaching manhood. Here is the *jambiyyah* my father received from his father. In order to purchase it, my grandfather first went to the market and chose a well-made blade. Later a hilt (handle) and scabbard (holder) were bought.

Jambiyyahs can be very, very expensive. The most valuable ones have hilts made of rhinoceros horn. Sometimes beautiful old Islamic coins are also set into them. Today, because the African rhinoceros is an endangered animal, rhino horn is no longer imported. Water buffalo horn, camel nail and occasionally ivory are now used to make the hilts. For the less expensive *jambiyyah* hilts, even plastic is used.

My father and other men of the village wear their jambiyyahs only for decoration, not for fighting! The *jambiyyah* is held in place by a wide embroidered leather belt.

Insha Allah, my father will soon buy me a *jambiyyah*. I have told him I would like one as beautiful as the one he got from my grandfather!


ناجي

For thousands of years, mountain villagers of Yemen have been growing their crops in narrow terraced fields. Here on the edge of Al-Ashrafiyyah village you can see our family's small terraced bed of fresh onions and chick peas.

The large water cistern (called a *birkah* in Arabic) was built a long time ago by villagers. It is filled by underground springs and the heavy seasonal rainfalls of late summer or early fall. The water is used to irrigate all the fields lying below. Village children love playing near this pool of water. It is four metres deep – an ideal swimming hole! In fact, my cousin taught me to swim here when I was six years old! We also use this water for making ablutions and there is a small *musallah* nearby for praying.

On some terraces, coffee is grown. This important crop has been cultivated here in Yemen for hundreds of years. Many people say our coffee is the best in the world. This is probably true because our villagers examine their coffee bushes daily. The cherries (unpicked coffee beans) must not all ripen at the same time. Moreover, no chemical pesticides are used. To kill pests that might attack the growing coffee, a traditional method is employed: smoke from fires lit under the coffee bushes, effectively controls pests.

I remember spending many long summer days guarding the fields of growing wheat. My brothers and I would use slingshots made of plaited goat's hair to keep wild baboons from eating the crops!

In pre-Islamic times, Yemen was an important trading centre. Many towns and cities grew rich because of the trade in expensive aromatics (incense). In many parts of Yemen today, one can find find traces of the pre-Islamic Sabaean and Himyaritic kingdoms. In those ancient times, the people living in my country wrote their language using a very beautiful writing system called *musnad* in Arabic.

Examples of this old form of writing can be seen mainly on rock faces all over Yemen. In our village, several old houses have foundation stones covered with *musnad* inscriptions. I can not read them, but experts who study this writng system at universities can. This old South Arabian script had 29 letters.

The example of *musnad* writing in the picture comes from an area not far from Al-Ashrafiyyah village. Some villagers there told me the meaning of this inscription. It discusses the reconstruction of a border castle between the kingdoms of Himyar and Saba'.

After Yemen embraced Islam and we began to read the Holy Qur'an, the Arabic script quickly replaced the *musnad* system of writing. Today, whenever we see examples of *musnad* inscriptions, we remember that Yemen has a very ancient history.

ناجي

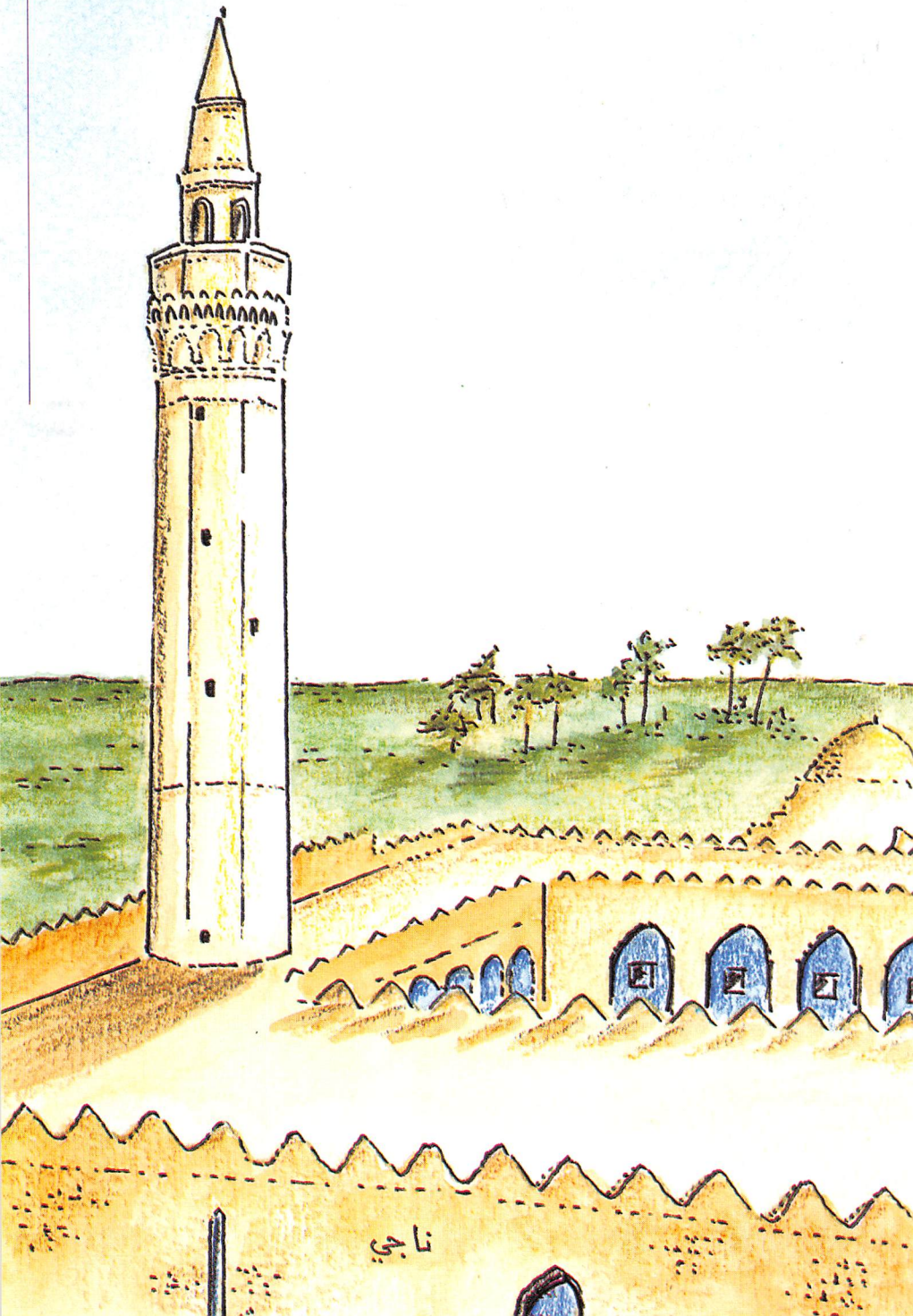
All Muslims in Yemen have a special fondness for Mu'adh ibn Jabal Ansari (*radhi Allahu 'anhu*) the beloved Companion of the Prophet ﷺ because of his very important connection with our country.

As a very young boy, I remember hearing the stories of Mu'adh ibn Jabal. Mu'adh grew up in Yathrib (Al-Madinah) and embraced Islam before the *hijrah*. He visited the Prophet ﷺ in Makkah where he pledged his allegiance to him. Mu'adh was an excellent student of Islam. The Prophet ﷺ reportedly said, "The most knowledgeable of my *ummah* in matters of *halal* and *haram* is Mu'adh ibn Jabal."

Various kings of Yemen sent messages to the Prophet ﷺ in Al-Madinah informing him that they and their people had accepted Islam. The Muslims in Yemen now needed *du'at*, wise teachers to instruct them in their new religion. The Prophet ﷺ, therefore, chose Mu'adh ibn Jabal as governor of Yemen and as leader of a group of *du'at* to be sent there.

Before leaving for Yemen, the Prophet ﷺ asked Mu'adh how he would rule the area. "Should any problem arise, I will first try to solve it using the wisdom of the Holy Qur'an. If that fails, I will seek an answer in your *sunnah*. If this too is unsuccessful, I will issue my own orders in line with the revelations of Allah," Mu' adh replied. Our Prophet ﷺ was very pleased with this answer and prayed that all rulers of the world govern in this way.

Last summer, I visited the Great Mosque in the village of Al-Janad, not far from the city of Taizz. This is one of the oldest and most important mosques in all of Yemen. Mu'adh ibn Jabal spent many years preaching in this very mosque. Its tall, single white minaret proclaims Allah's Oneness and reminds us of the foremost goal in the life of Mu'adh ibn Jabal (*radhi Allahu 'anhu*), may Allah be pleased with him.


ناجي

The first minarets of Islam (from the Arabic *manarah* meaning "lighthouse") in Islam were probably just a few external steps leading to a roof top.

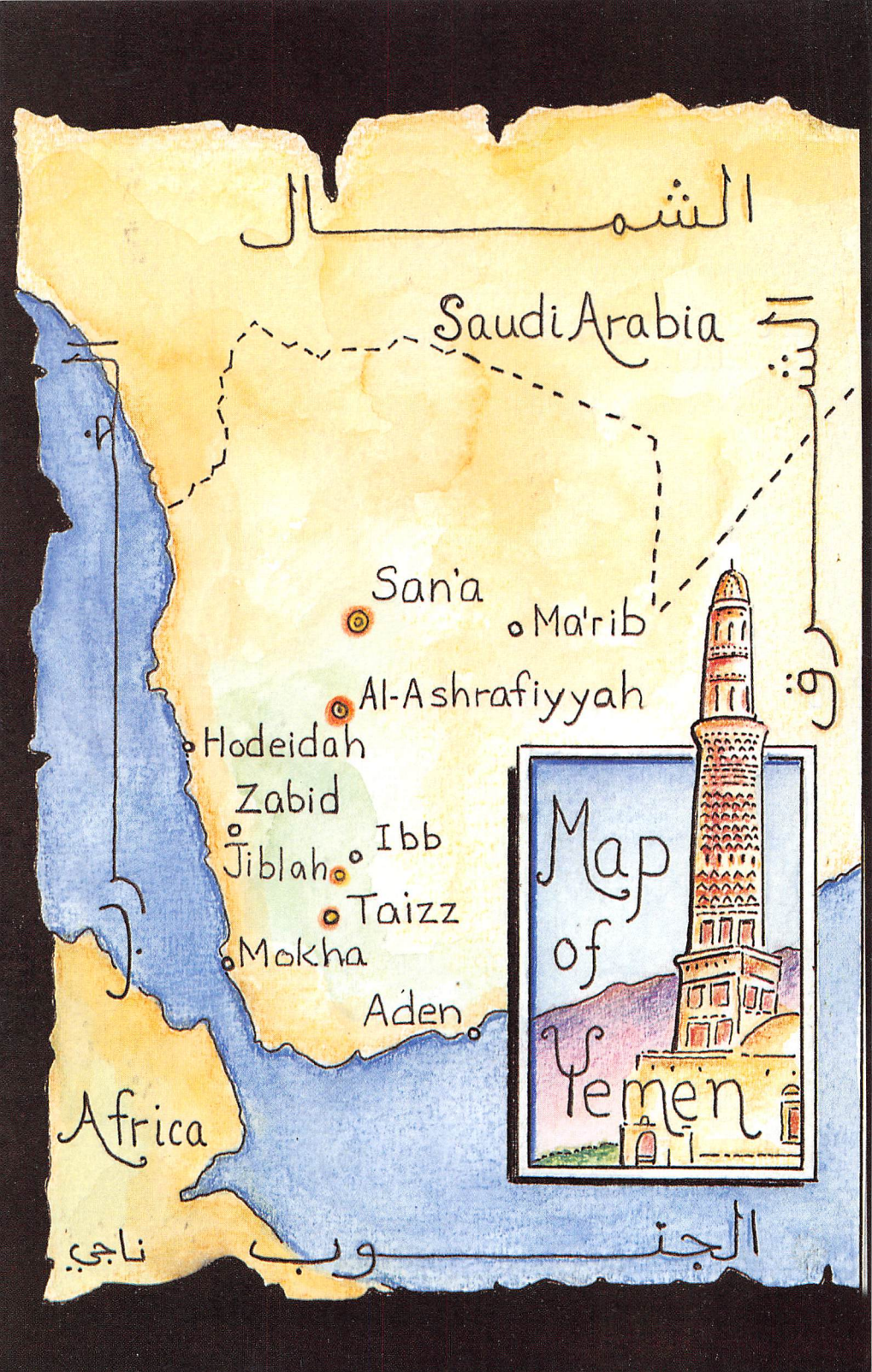
The minaret as we know it today started as a square and then became an 8-sided octagon. Finally, it became a cylinder topped with a small dome.

There are many types of minarets built in Yemen. In the mountains, local stone, of course, is used as a building material. My father designed and built the stone minaret you see here. A staircase inside the minaret takes the muezzin to the top window from where he begins to recite the *adhan* : *Allahu Akbar.*

In other parts of Yemen, a mixture of mud and straw is used to make bricks. These, in turn, are used to make minarets which are sometimes covered with plaster and then painted. Beautiful Qur'anic *ayahs* are often written in brick around their bases. For example, another minaret in the picture has *ayah al-kursi* (the "Throne Verse") inscribed at its base.

Al-Hamdulillah, I am a Muslim who lives in a land as old as Islam itself ! We in Yemen have been builders in stone for thousands of years. Our traditional way of life links us directly with our past. *Insha Allah*, I will become a master builder of minarets, just like my father. *Insha Allah*, my minarets will remain standing for centuries and will always call Muslims to *din al-haqq.*

الله لا اله الا هو
الحي القيوم
ناجي


الشمال
Saudi Arabia
San'a
Ma'rib
Al-Ashrafiyyah
Hodeidah
Zabid
Jiblah
Ibb
Taizz
Mokha
Aden
Africa
ناجي
الجنوب
Map of Yemen

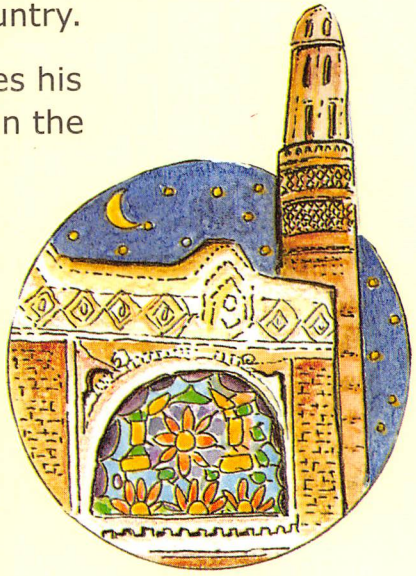
My Islamic Village

Also in this series:

My Hausa Village
My Turkish Village
My Moroccan Village

Dear Children: This book is for you. In it, 'Abd al-Nur, a boy from Yemen, will introduce you to the traditional culture of his beautiful mountain village. You will learn many new and interesting things about his life and the history of his very ancient country.

Each evening, 'Abd al-Nur does his homework and reads Qur'an in the *mafraj*, the top storey of his tower-house. From the outside, the beautiful glass window panes offer a very colourful scene.



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